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OA Guide to Nature Observation & Stalking by Rick Curtis

Learning to track is a sacred responsibility. It gives you the ability to come into the center of the lives and homes of animals. You must treasure this gift and respect the animals by being non-intrusive. Getting too close to animals can cause serious disturbances including: abandoning young, disturbing nesting grounds, damaging foraging areas, and may even cause the animal's death. For example, in winter, many animals are severely stressed to gather enough energy to stay alive. Escaping from a human presence could rob them of enough energy that they can no longer sustain themselves. Always remember that you are only a visitor into their habitat.

The most important part of nature observation is *relaxation*. Observation and stalking require you to slow down and settle yourself. It is akin to a moving form of meditation. Animals can sense when you are agitated, anxious or fearful and will disappear. When you settle yourself, you can move among animals without them sensing your presence. You must press yourself to use *all* of your senses *all* of the time or they will become atrophied.

I. Varied Sensory Awareness

Vary your vision. Pay intermittent attention to your environment. Shift your focus. If you pay rapt attention to one thing, it will dull your senses ("highway hypnosis"). You will learn more if you are paying intermittent attention. Flash back and forth through your various senses, vision, hearing, smell, touch, and taste.

II. Wide Angle (Splatter) Vision vs. Pinpoint Vision

We tend to use focal vision about 95% of the time and wide-angle vision only 5%. Animals use the reverse (5% and 95%). To use wide-angle vision you want to take in all the information from your peripheral vision constantly then focus down when needed. Concentrate on the entire picture, mentally blocking out information to focus down.

The primary thing that gives you away (or an animal) is movement. Focused vision doesn't pick up movement whereas wide-angle vision makes the eye reactive to movement. When you notice movement then focus down to that object. And once focused, keep tracking that animal visually very closely so that you don't lose it. Keep this process in mind! This is how the animals look for you. Anything that is out of the natural order, movement, shadow, or noise attracts their attention and they focus on it.

At night using wide-angle vision utilizes all the peripheral areas of the eye which are more sensitive to low levels of light. This improves night travel and seeing animals. It will allow you to notice nighttime animal movement. Flashlights cause focal vision which restrict your sensitivity to movement. At night a wind will blow things in one rhythm. Anything moving contrary to that rhythm, check it out with focal vision.

III. Automatic Vision

When you are looking at something you scan "take a picture" then scan, "take a picture" etc. as you look

across a landscape. When you look across that landscape again you tend to “take the same pictures” or focus on the same spots. The Blind Spots (dead air space) are the ones you miss. Over time the number of automatic snap shots decreases until you only see a few out of the whole scene. Eventually you really don’t see it at all. *You must consciously fight dead air space all the time. Each time you look at a scene again look at it as something new.* Also, don’t just look at solid objects (e.g. a tree); look through the spaces of the tree, between the branches. There may be a deer behind that tree that you will see if you look through it rather than looking at it.

IV. Focused Hearing

We have tremendous peripheral hearing with our ears on the sides of our heads, but poor focused hearing. Since we can’t move our ears as many animals can, we don’t have directional hearing. But we can increase our hearing by 10x by cupping our hands, thumbs up, behind our ears, with the elbows out. This creates a parabolic reflector which gathers the sound in to our ears. This technique is paramount in locating animals and finding out what lies ahead of you.

V. What to Wear

The least clothing for the weather is best. More skin exposure allows you to better feel the landscape. Camouflage the body. Clothing should be loose fitting so that you can move easily but not baggy to catch on things and make noise. Type of clothing depends on the weather. Dressing in layers is important to give you flexibility in controlling your dead air space = warmth. Wool is good because it repels water and will keep you warm even when wet. Cotton is fine in warm weather and is quiet. Avoid nylons because it “whistles” as you move. Plaids and checks or camouflage is good because it breaks up your outline. Earth tone colors are best. Footwear - Moccasins are best, then tennis shoes. (Bare feet are great if your feet can stand it). Sneakers are ok. Avoid lug soles. They are too stiff and don’t give you any feeling/feedback from the ground.

VI. Traveling

Stalk and observe from downwind if you can. Also being downwind helps carry your noise away from the animal. Pick out the easiest route of travel. See what’s ahead of you with wide- angle vision before you get there. Stick to the shadows. Avoid open patches of sun. Your shadow can give you away, especially over water. Use the wind or rain to cover the noise of your movement, but also be aware that predators are doing the same thing, so many animals are more aware at these times. Don’t skyline yourself. Don’t silhouette yourself against a light background; conform to the landscape. Use all your senses.

When looking around objects, lower yourself to your belly, ease around the base of the object and look. With grasses use the thick lower grass to hide your body. Ease up slowly from below into the thinner grass just until you can see in between the grass. This should break up your outline (check to make sure). Keep in mind that animals tend to look high (at the human level) for the most dangerous predator (you). Therefore, come out low. If you move brush pull it back over you. If you part brush with hands to “snake” through slowly, let it close slowly and not snap back. When going through saplings there can be a lot of movement. Go slowly and let the movement flow and imitate the wind moving the saplings. Move like a shadow, not like the wind; the wind makes too much noise.

VII. Stalking

We walk very inefficiently for the woods. We commit our foot before each step is even on the ground. We land heel first then roll onto the toe, using shins and stomach muscles. We lean forward and lead with our head. In order to maintain balance we need a larger straddle to support the weight. Thus the feet pitch out and with the body leaning forward, the head is down all the time looking to see where to put the next foot. The person presses

the leg down with the calf muscles and pulls it up with the groin muscles. The heel slam jams up to the back leading to back trouble, ankle sprains, etc.

1) Fox Walk - This walk is the basic step for walking quietly in the wilderness. It has three basic parts which are diagramed below. This technique allows you to feel the surface of the ground and slowly compress, leaves, sticks etc. to minimize noise.

1. Lower the foot to land on the outside of the ball with light pressure.
2. Roll off the edge of the foot onto the ball laying the whole foot down still with only partial weight.
3. Place full weight on foot.

2) Weasel Walk - This step is similar to the Fox Walk. It can be used for quick travel and allows a great deal of flexibility in stooping, standing, rotating/pivoting, and moving sideways.

1. The body is over the thighs, knees bent.
2. Lower the foot to land on the outside of the ball with light pressure.
3. Roll off the edge of the foot onto the ball keeping the heel off the ground.
4. Place full weight on the ball. The heel can land but only for temporary balance.

In the weasel walk you should role play being a weasel. Keep quiet, keep the same speed as the Fox Walk but lower the body to keep the outline low to avoid being seen. Stalking an animal is a “chess game;” sometimes moving fast other times moving slowly. The Weasel Walk is the fast part of the chess game. This walk is an excellent way to build leg strength for stalking.

The “Weasel Exercise” do the weasel walk with a straight back for as long as is comfortable (approx. 1 minute) without straightening the legs. Take a day off the double your time, day off, double etc. up to doing it for several minutes.

3) Fox Run - This utilizes the same step pattern as the Fox Walk. In addition, as you hit on the outside of the ball and roll in, you bend your knee to take up the shock of impact. The faster you move, the more you commit your weight ahead of time, and the less “feeling” you do with each step. Therefore, the more you need to look at the ground ahead of you. You want to only allow for slight shoulder movement and very little arm swing.

4) Stalk - This step is *very* slow, about 1 minute per step. Minimize all body movement. With a perfect stalking step you can walk on low grass upright and touch a deer (*beware* some animals - raccoon etc. will bite if touched and animals may have rabies). There is a stalking walk, a crawl on all fours and a belly crawl.

5) Aspects of Stalking -

1. Slow
2. Every motion is flowing, nothing jumpy.
3. Compressing - slowly press leaves etc. under feet controlling/limiting noise.
4. Freezing - if the animal looks up you must stop in your position and hold it until the animal is no longer focused on you.

You must learn to use your entire body and feet as a receptor. Anything you brush against you must give with it and flow around it. Remember, animals see the jerkiness of movement. A slow flowing movement is natural, like the wind.

Look at the animal first and everything else second. Don't look at the ground - use your feet to feel the surface. By using wide-angle vision you will see trails to take and alternate routes. It is better to take 20 steps around a bush than 3 (noisy) steps through. Keep the animal in the center of your wide-angle vision.

6) Stalking Technique -

1. Take a step forward, moving from the middle of your body.
2. Shift your weight until the knee is over the toes,
3. then straighten up on that leg, unweighting on rear leg
4. as you straighten the rear heel lifts up,
5. with the rear toe pointed down, lift the knee up,
6. move the leg forward,
7. then knife the foot down to the ground, outer foot edge first, ankle twisted outward, drop knee to lower foot to ground.
8. Land on the edge of the foot at the ball, with no weight.
9. Roll to the inside of the ball, no weight.
10. Lower the heel, slowly compressing, no weight.
11. Drop toes, no weight.
12. Place a little weight on the entire surface.
13. Slowly increase to full weight.
14. If you crack something, stop all movement, count to 30 slowly before you start to move again. The noise isn't the problem, it's the repetitive movement. Sticks crack in the woods all the time, the animal will look up, if there is no movement it looks away. If it sees movement, it goes on the alert.
15. At 10 feet from an animal, close your mouth to eliminate teeth shine. Keep eyes squinted to avoid glistening and motion. If the weather is cold, breathe down over your lower lip so that your misty breath flows along your chest rather than out alongside your head.
16. You can stalk with your arms along your sides to eliminate human outline. With arms along the sides you can be a tree. Think like a tree. You can also use your arms to pull your legs up.

7) Going from a Standing Stalk to a Crawl - This is used if you need to move through a bush or under branches.

1. Slowly bend down.
2. Slip hands down along your body.
3. Drop one knee to the ground, hitting gently on the outside and rolling in, weight it.
4. Take hand on the same side as the knee and slice it down to the ground like a knife, sideways, landing on the outer edge of the hand and rolling in, weight it.
5. Knife the next hand down, roll it, weight it.
6. Place the last knee, roll it in, weight it.
7. Go into a slow diagonal walk.

8) Going to a Belly Crawl -

1. Get both knees even,
2. Walk hands forward slowly until body is almost fully extended.
3. Slowly compress and lower, starting at the knees and working up to the belly and chest keeping the back arched.

9) From a Belly Crawl, Up -

1. With hands even, press body back to knees.
2. Shift upper body over knees.
3. Rock back, lifting one knee off the ground.
4. Shift weight onto that leg and stand slowly.

VIII. Descending

- 1) Internal** - be relaxed. Any tensions you have are released and sensed by animals. This is an important

survival skill for the animals.

2) External - This is for removing human odors. First, avoid using perfumes, after-shaves, scented toilet paper etc. Wash with a natural soap (Dr. Bronner's) or mild soap without deodorants (Ivory). eating garlic, onions, or red meat for several days (these all create specific body odors). Any specific descending should be done before you enter an area.

1. **Fragrant plant** - Crush a fragrant plant or evergreen needles and rub on the body particularly heavy scent areas, throat, arms, armpits, and groin. As you sweat you will need to redo this. Don't take all the plant from one site - it does too much area damage.
2. **Strong tea** - various types especially pine tea can be brewed up and kept in a misting bottle. yourself as you go into an area. It is important to make the tea from a local plant or the smell will be recognized as unnatural.
3. **Smoke from a campfire** - smoke smell is natural in the woods. Only seeing smoke or fire frightens animals. By standing in smoke your descent yourself and your clothes.
4. **Sweat Lodge** - this is the most effective (and most time consuming) descending method.
 - i. Take a bath with natural soap.
 - ii. Take a sweat for 20 minutes, cleaning out the pores and relaxing the mind and body for the stalk.
 - iii. Clean off in a stream. The stream must be clear or the open pores will suck in dirt.
 - iv. Descent you and your clothes using a,b, and c. Or put your clothes in a bag with pine and cedar boughs for several days before stalking.

IX. Camouflage

Any camouflage should be created for the area you are stalking in. Based on vegetation and colors.

1) Exposed Body Parts - everything should be mottled to break up your outline. A clear area is an indication of something.

1. Put on a base coat - take the shine off hair and skin using dirt, dust, or mud, These all dry to a solid dull color. Over that blotch in skin with black charcoal, mottle it in. Do the bottom of your feet if barefoot (when lying down) and if wearing shorts camo up high (in case the shorts ride up).

Bibliography

Tom Brown's Field Guide to Nature Observation and Tracking, Tom Brown and Brandt Morgan, Berkeley, New York, 1983.

Tracking & Nature Observation Field Session:

- Make a track box alongside a trail at the institute and make marks.
- Demonstrate & practice Wide-angle vision.
- Demonstrate & Practice focused hearing.
- Spend 5 minutes with one plot of ground, know it intimately.
- Demonstrate Fox Walk, practice in field.

- Demonstrate Weasel Walk, practice, do Weasel Exercise.
- Check track box.
- Demonstrate stalk to crawl to belly.
- Practice stalk using “deer” in field.
- Lunch - go over notes on ways to move, camo, descending.
- Go back into woods to find and examine tracks
- Key people on transition areas.
- Check out den.
- See river bank tracks.
- Side heading.
- Look at track patterns.
- Examine tracks for gaits.
- Use tracking stick.
- Measure tracks.
- Look for sign in various scales.
- Recheck track box.

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